

Arcade Culture

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Culture is a site of the secret, of seduction, of initiation, of a restrained and highly ritualized symbolic exchange. Nothing can be done about it. Too bad for the masses. . .

Jean Baudrillard

If you've never been inside a Japanese game center, and if you are not old enough to have witnessed what Western arcades looked like in their heyday, you will perhaps find it difficult to accept this claim that I am about to make here. Besides, I don't have any relevant statistics to back it up, and though I could certainly do some research and come up with some myself, frankly, I have better things to do with my time.

The starting point of this essay then — and make of it what you will — is the observation that *games released in the arcades are of a much higher quality, on average, than games released for the home console market*. In other words, if you decided to walk into an arcade today blindfolded, and spend the evening playing the first game you bumped into (having taken off the blindfold first, yeah), chances are you'd have a lot more fun than if you spent the same amount of time playing something picked at random off the shelves of your local game retailer. Because the worst that could happen in the first case is that you'd end up with something like Jingo Storm or Mario Kart Arcade GP — not exactly the most gripping and cutting-edge stuff out there, certainly, but still tightly focused and at least mildly enjoyable games, for a short while anyway. In the second case, though, you could very

well get stuck with some lifeless movie tie-in, or some dull sports franchise, or some bloated 3D platform collect-a-thon, or, worse still, with one of the countless shovelware titles that are always being churned out for whichever console happens to be the most popular at the moment. With all this utter rubbish lining the shelves you'd be a lucky man indeed if you ended up with something actually worth playing.

So this is how it is, and you either know it, or you don't. But I want to stress here that I am not out to convince anyone of the truth of this claim, or of that of all the other claims I will shortly be making. If you find yourself agreeing with me it will be because you already know by experience that what I am saying is true, so no proof will be necessary. I will merely be putting into words things you are already aware of — not fully consciously, perhaps, or without quite having worked out all the reasons yet — but aware of them all the same.

Old-timers, hardcore gamers, Japan-hounds: these are the kinds of people this essay is written for (indeed, these are the kinds of people this website is written for). As for everyone else: the lazy kids who whine about the difficulty in such simple games as *Ninja Gaiden* (the latest one, yes) or *Devil May Cry 3*; the casual, party gamers with their Wiis and ever-growing collections of gimmicky mini-games; the PlayStation generation that missed out on gaming's golden age and never got a chance to develop good taste in games; the hordes of uncouth, uneducated retards who practically live in videogame forums across the internet, grouping themselves into rival camps of fanboys, unquestioningly loyal — like dogs — to a single hardware platform, genre or developer; the “games are art” fags who won't shut up already about *Ico* and *Rez*, and who can't even tell the difference between basketball (a game) and the Mona Lisa (art); or the new games journalists and their impressionable adolescent followers who think that some flowery adjectives dug up from a thesaurus can make up for the fact that they don't have a *fucking clue* about what it is they are talking about — as for all these people, *as for the masses*, yes, I am afraid there is no hope for them. Nothing can be done about it.

And that is not unfortunate. Just try to imagine what would happen if the masses suddenly took to arcade gaming (and here, and throughout, by “arcade gaming” I mean the real thing — not the farce that is XBLA and other similar services), flooding this small, fragile market with truckloads of cash, infecting developers with greed for the quick bucks, and trampling everything under the overwhelming weight of their ignorance and bad taste.

Not a pretty picture, is it?

But then again it's also not one we should be worried about, because it's not just unrealistic, but also practically impossible. Because an arcade is a magical place that can transform ignorant, whiny kids into fucking ninjas. It's just how it works: you walk in a trash-talking, limp-wristed, Final Fantasy-playing, useless *idiot*, and you walk out finally humble and respectful towards skill-based games and the players who take them on.

But I am getting ahead of myself here — I'll back up a little to answer a question that just begs to be answered.

So I started out by observing that arcade games adhere to a much higher standard of quality than console games — one need only walk into a Japanese game center to realize this. But why is that?

Why are arcade games so good?

Arcade games are good because they just have to be. Floor space is always limited in an arcade, regardless of how big it may be, and a game that's not making much money is simply taking up space from another one that does. The fact that all these games are sitting right there, right next to each other, and that a few coins is all it takes to try them all out, means that the players can easily compare them and judge for themselves their quality, directing their attention to those they deem the best.

Ignorance on the part of the players then will not come to the rescue of lazy developers trying to shove some shitty game down people's throats armed with nothing but a big-name licence, a flashy cover and a marketing budget. Arcade gamers are not forced to rely on morally bankrupt and/or incompetent publications to find out which games are out there and which are worth playing. Arcade publishers are not in a position to manipulate their customer base by employing sophisticated marketing campaigns that last for months, if not years, building up hype around their upcoming releases according to painstakingly-developed formulas that dictate every stage in an almost Orwellian process of disinformation: from the wild claims and hoopla of the carefully-staged initial announcement, to the "leaking" of pre-rendered screenshots and exaggerated featuresets, to the release of trailers expertly designed to cover shortcomings, finally culminating on the day of release with blanket ad coverage and blatantly dishonest reviews from compliant publications.

None of that *fucking bullshit* is effective in an arcade environment where

every coin a player drops in the slot is effectively a vote for the quality of that game, and where the player will simply quit the second he feels he is not being entertained. The fact that the “voters” themselves are usually older and more experienced than the average person who buys console games (which demographic nowadays includes millions of market-distorting kids and their moms, dads, relatives, etc.) helps explain why Arcadia’s monthly lists of the top arcade earners are always filled with — at the very least — *good games*, whereas the various top console game charts around the world are usually made up of the worst imaginable dreck scooped up from the inside of a seemingly bottomless barrel.

So this is how the arcades work: a highly competitive and transparent environment, experienced players, no magazines, no clueless reviewers, practically non-existent marketing budgets — and what do you get?

Good games and players who are capable of appreciating them.

And it’s all thanks to a business model.

But don’t be as naive as to imagine that all this is a result of conscious effort on the part of arcade developers, publishers or operators. None of them are directly responsible for the creation of this unique environment: for that we only have the industry’s business model to thank. (And who first came up with that? Man, don’t expect me to know everything. Go check Wikipedia or something.)

Because every single thing that’s great about arcade games can be traced back to the pay-per-play model. Nothing is a result of chance.

– *Why are the controls always spot-on and intuitive?*

Because players wouldn’t put up with anything less: they’d simply move on to the next game in line.

– *Why are there no cutscenes?*

Because operators wouldn’t tolerate games which expect players to just sit there and watch some movie clip for fifteen minutes at a time — as far as they are concerned if you are not playing you are not losing, and if you are not losing they are not making any money.

– *Why are licenced games rare?*

Because the primary function of a licence (to trick people into buying a bad game) doesn’t work in an arcade environment where no one buys anything and where crap games can be exposed for what they are with a

single credit.

– *Why are the games extremely challenging?*

Because operators would not invest in games which many of their customers could beat in a short time, before they got a chance to recoup their investment and turn a healthy profit.

– *Why is there no padding (à la Halo, for example, where half the latter stages are a bad joke)?*

Because arcade players, since they are not forced to invest up front large sums of money in specific games, do not feel obligated to keep playing a game which turns to shit and laughs at them after the half-way point (a boring third or fourth stage will do almost as much harm to an arcade game's earnings as a boring first stage).

Outsiders fail to appreciate this, but the arcade environment is very tough on developers, who have two sets of customers to satisfy here: the players, of course, but also the operators, who place their own demands on what a game should play like.

So they have the operators on one side, who only care about money, and the players on the other, who want to be entertained while *getting good value for their money*, and the developers are in the middle trying to please everyone, succeeding or failing solely on their ability to design extremely challenging but at the same time compelling and worthwhile games, without the fallback options of media manipulation and blitz marketing campaigns to bail them out if things start to go wrong.

The process of degeneration

This tough business model then is what's responsible for the creation of this unique branch of gaming. Arcade gaming is not a genre; it's a design philosophy the principles of which can be discerned with equal clarity in old games such as *Bubble Bobble* and *Chase H.Q.*, and new ones such as *Arcana Heart* and *Mushihime-sama Futari*.

But though arcade gaming does not represent a specific genre, it *contains* genres (or sometimes outright *invents* them), and what it always does is that it shapes them, it streamlines them, by imposing on them its unique set of stringent requirements.

That's why a true arcade racer, for example, plays so differently from a modern console racer. Or an arcade platformer from a modern console plat-

former. And I say “modern” here because this great differentiation between the arcade and console variants of the different genres did not always exist. Many early console games were essentially arcade games because console developers used to *look up* to the arcade industry for ideas and inspiration. Times were very different back then, skill-based games were still respected, and indeed reigned supreme, and so arcade-like games did very well even outside their natural environment, even on home consoles.

So even though in the console space there was no pressing need for an original game (as opposed to a port of an arcade game) to offer a tough, long-lasting challenge, many of them did. Up to and including the 16-bit era examples of original console titles designed using the arcade philosophy abound.

But this state of things could not have lasted forever.

Capcom’s *Chohmakaimura* (*Super Ghouls ’n Ghosts* in the West), a Super Famicom-exclusive title, was a sequel to a popular arcade franchise in which the signs of things that were to come are clearly visible, at least with hindsight.

The game was... too easy.

Being a big fan of the series and having pumped countless coins into the first two games in the arcades, I imported the latest installment as soon as it came out and ended up beating it within less than a week. That’s compared to the first two games which I’ve yet to beat — and probably never will.

This game is perhaps a bad example to illustrate the point I want to make here, because its predecessors were far too hard even by arcade standards, so the toning down of the difficulty of the third, console-exclusive, installment was not unjustified (though I still maintain that Capcom overcompensated).

But the point is that *Choh* had ever-so-slightly — but still quite clearly — veered away from its roots and from the arcade design philosophy, because it would not have made the operators very happy had Capcom tried to sell it to them. The veterans of the series would have pooped all over it even faster than I did, and from then on only the occasional noobs would be playing it. The game’s earnings would therefore have collapsed far too soon for the operators to recoup their initial investment and turn a satisfactory profit. At the very least, it would have made them less money than its predecessors.

And can you now begin to see why arcade games *have* to be difficult, and why it’s absolutely vital that they offer a long-lasting challenge?

Understand that arcade operators want the player to die (and as quickly as possible).

Understand also that players do not want to die.

Understand finally that the developers, whose job, as we have seen, is to please these two sets of demanding customers, have to strike a compromise, and the only satisfactory compromise that could be struck under the circumstances is:

Only the skilled may live — the rest will die.

This harsh statement may as well have been engraved above the entrance of every arcade joint that ever existed. It is a direct consequence of the arcade industry's business model, and forms the core of a formula around which all arcade games are built. It is responsible for the magic of arcade gaming.

But this magic cannot be recreated outside the environment that gave birth to it — at least not without conscious and disciplined effort on the part of both developers and players. Because outside the arcade environment *there are no arcade operators*, and hence the compromise that led to the above formula is not necessary anymore. Without the operators to balance the demands of the players, there's no reason for developers to try and challenge the players. Almost imperceptibly at first (as with *Chohmakaimura* and with many other titles released around that time), but with increasing boldness and disregard as time goes by, they move away from the arcade philosophy. They start to pander to the players: they flatter them, they play to their vanity, they give them elaborate cutscenes and ending cinematics and little useless trinkets (unlockables and the like) to trick them into feeling a sense of accomplishment — the kind of feeling that they used to earn before by overcoming a difficult challenge.

And so the games become easier. And they lose their focus. And they degenerate.

Want to see what a degenerate arcade game plays like?

Play *R-Type Final*. Play the latest bloated *Ridge Racers*. Play *Gokumakaimura*.

The essence of arcade gaming

I've reached the most difficult part of what I want to say, and since there's no delicate way to put this so as to avoid drawing accusations of elitism, I am just going to go ahead and blurt it out:

To understand the essence of arcade gaming you must never continue.

Like, ever.

Let's get this straight right now: it's very hard for me to communicate to you with mere words, from a distance, the essence of arcade gaming — you'll have to look for that and find it for yourself. The most I can do is show you the way, and this is what I just did.

Now Malc from *Shmups* knows what I am talking about here, and so does Tom Cannon and MrWizard from *SRK*, and Gaijin Punch from *gamengai*, and Recap from *Postback*, and WoVou from *Neo-Arcadia*, and other owners of arcade-focused websites, and many (though certainly not all) of their readers and community members.

These are the people I was referring to in the beginning — the ones who already understand the essence of arcade gaming, having discovered it either by spending time in real arcades, or, if not, by hanging out (either off- or online) with others who had done so.

But there are many enthusiastic gamers out there who suspect what this is all about, but are not yet quite convinced. People who've been exposed to arcade gaming perhaps only through home ports and emulation, and who find these games interesting and charming, but who can't quite see the reason they should be limiting themselves to one credit at a time. I mean really now, they usually ask, what's so wrong about using a few extra credits from time to time?

These people are missing the point of arcade gaming, these people think that they are playing these games but in reality it is the games that are playing them, and so it is these people that I want to try and help now. The masses, as I've mentioned, are beyond hope, and there is nothing unfortunate about that. But for those lurking around the fringes of the masses... there is always hope for their seduction.

But before I go on it's worth noting that these people are not to be blamed for failing to understand arcade gaming. After all, the one-credit rule was born in the arcade environment and really only makes sense there — *and it can only be understood there*. Most Westerners (and especially the younger ones) have never even set foot in a proper arcade — how can anyone expect them to adopt such an unforgiving playing style in the comfort of their own homes, when all the arcade games they have are effectively set on freeplay?

It would be extremely strange if they did this of their own accord!

And yet they must, for there is no other way. I've mentioned this already but it's worth repeating:

The magic of arcade gaming cannot be recreated outside the environment

that gave birth to it — at least not without conscious and disciplined effort on the part of both developers and players.

So what I will now attempt to do is explain the reasoning behind the one-credit rule, in the hopes of getting a few more people to adopt it. Without a doubt it will be the hardest thing I've so far tried to accomplish on this website.

If this doesn't convince you nothing will

Come with me to one of those huge multistory arcades in Akihabara, those extremely loud and colorful game centers which form the heart of the arcade world (most location testing for new games takes place here). On weekends people ride trains for hours from the suburbs, or even from nearby cities, to come here and perform in front of other enthusiastic fans, or compete against them, as a change from the narrowness and familiarity of their local scenes — but above all, I suspect, to sample the unabashedly festive atmosphere that makes you feel sometimes as if you'd gone out and travelled back to the early '90s. Here, in short, is where the seductive powers of the arcade form are currently at their strongest.

Let's go to Hey arcade.

It's nine p.m. on a Saturday and about as busy as it gets.

The arcade takes up two basketball court-sized floors and is packed with a couple of hundred cabinets. Right now most of them are in use, and around the newer, more popular games there are lines of three or four, or sometimes as many as a dozen players waiting for a go.

But we are not going to be playing anything. We are only here to observe.

The center of the first floor is taken up by several dozen shooting games. Everything by Cave, of course, but also G.rev's *Under Defeat*, and a four-cab setup of *Senko no Ronde SP* with a plasma monitor displaying live matches, and Treasure's *Radiant Silvergun* and *Ikaruga*, and all the *Raiden* and *Raiden Fighters* games (including *Raiden IV*, which just came out), and *Shiki III* and *Karous* and *Triggerheart Exelica*, and a section with over a dozen classics: *G-Darius*, *Gradius II*, *R-Type*, *Last Resort*, *Ray Force*, and even several run 'n guns: overhead ones like *Gain Ground* and *Senjou no Ookami*, or side-scrollers like *Gun Force* and *Wolf Fang*.

On the screens of these games reigns total madness. Someone is going through *Ketsui*'s second loop seemingly absent-mindedly; someone else is

shitting all over *Batrider*'s final boss. Those waiting in line to play Muchi Muchi Pork! are carefully watching the current players (being new, the game is currently set up in three cabs) in hopes of picking up some hints or high-scoring tactics. Meanwhile, most of those playing the older classics are going through them with a casualness and precision that makes one wonder whether they ever play anything else.

On the far side of the room are the showy games in their imposing, dedicated cabinets: *After Burner Climax*, *The House of the Dead 4*, *Time Crisis 4*, and the racing games: a row of brand-new *Initial D Arcade Stage 4* machines next to Taito's HD version of its recent *Battle Gear 4*.

One guy is playing *House of the Dead 4* using both uzis at the same time, gunning down one horde of zombies after another while hitting all the gold coins and bonus items with hardly a bullet going to waste; meanwhile, the races between the *Initial D* addicts seem more heated than those in the anime.

In the space between the light gun shooters and the racers there's a *Dance Dance Revolution SuperNOVA* cab, presently occupied by a sweaty salaryman – shirt unbuttoned, tie and jacket resting on top of briefcase on the floor – while several others are crowded around him looking on.

In another corner there's a row of classic beat 'em ups. Capcom's *Alien vs. Predator*, *The Punisher* and *Captain Commando*, as well as *Knights of Valour 2: Nine Dragons* and *Oriental Legend Super* by the Taiwanese masters of IGS.

The player on the *Punisher* cab is currently on the fourth stage — where things start getting serious — methodically dispatching scores of knife- and gun-wielding thugs, none of whom seem able to so much as touch him. He must have memorized the entry point of every enemy in the entire game, and there's not a hint of anxiety in his tight movements and button-presses — he knows exactly what he is doing. Brawlers are usually thought of as cheap button-mashers in the West, but a few seconds watching this guy would be enough to set anyone straight on the matter.

Making our way back across the room, just before we reach the stairs to the second floor, we go by the puzzle games: a couple versions of Arika's excellent *Tetris: The Grand Master* games, then *Mr. Driller G*, then a Naomi puzzle game not even I have heard of, as well as several older classics. It's less crowded here and as a result the atmosphere is more relaxed, but the display of skill when someone does sit down is no less impressive (as long as one has the eyes for it, since a masterful performance in a puzzle game is

generally not quite as immediately eye-catching as in the other genres).

We move on to the second floor, and immediately sense a change in the atmosphere. It's even more crowded here, for one thing, there's more noise and more smoke and, perhaps... more energy in the air?

This is the fighting game floor.

In the screens of fifty or sixty cabs epic confrontations are taking place: players are clashing with punches, kicks and headbutts, with swords and axes and all kinds of fantastical weapons, and with colorful and dazzling displays of awesome magical powers.

The range of games on offer is stunning. From several versions of *Street Fighter II*, *III* and *Zero*, to the latest *King of Fighters* and *Samurai Spirits*, and to lesser known titles like *Hokuto no Ken*, to much older, more obscure ones like *Fighter's History* and *Gekka no Kenshi*, to the almost inaccessible (due to the crowds surrounding them) latest versions of the popular games: *Guilty Gear XX Accent Core*, *Arcana Heart Full!*, *Melty Blood: Act Cadenza Ver.B2*, and the brand-new high res *Battle Fantasia*. And commanding more space than anything else, the deluxe *Virtua Fighter 5* and *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection* setups with their live match broadcasting monitors and IC card dispensers, and dozens of other games: they're all here, and everything's continuously in use, to the point where the simple act of finding a free cab to sit down at and play on suddenly becomes its own mini-game.

Because it takes some balls to sit down in the first place, and not only because you might be a little self-conscious, what with being the only white (or, god forbid, black) person in the room. With the crowd situation as it is, sitting down almost always means CHALLENGING SOMEONE, and do you really feel you have what it takes to challenge these people?

So we slowly make our way past the crowds who stand there mesmerized by the charming chaos of endless confrontations, and reach the far end of the room where one can find other, different kinds of versus games. From the always-popular Gundam titles to *Virtual On Marz* and Taito's *Half-Life 2: Survivor*, to the giant orbs that serve as virtual cockpits for that other recent Gundam game, *Senjou no Kizuna*. There are people everywhere; playing; lining up; exchanging jokes and strategies; having a good time.

We take one last look at these two floors crammed with one hundred per cent arcade addicts and then walk out into the warm Tokyo night. Understandably, you're pumped up by all this and want to go back and play something, but we are here for a reason, and so I ask you to tell me whether you noticed anyone continuing during our little sightseeing trip.

It's a simple enough question but it surprises you. After all, there were so many things to see — not just the arcade itself and the crowd, but also *brand-new games that you had never before seen in person*, that the last thing on your mind was to check whether anyone happened to continue. Surely, you think out aloud, some of them must have been?

So we go back and pick games at random and sit next to them and watch people fuck up, and fail, and die. Again and again. In *Metal Slug 6* and *Argos no Senshi* and *Ghost Squad*, in *Ibara* and *2 Spicy*. We even sit there and watch as this fucking dude gets up all the way to the fourth form of the last boss of *Guwange*, having killed the demon spiders, and the demon caller, and the freaky demon spawn baby, and loses his last life just as the fucking demon guardian spirit thing is about to bite the dust. And what does this guy do? He gets up and leaves.

Why doesn't this guy drop in another coin and just bomb the fucking thing to death? What's a hundred yen worth these days — can he really be that cheap? Doesn't he want to see the ending? What the fuck is wrong with him?

What the fuck is wrong **with every single one of the several hundred fucking people in the two floors of this fucking arcade?**

Why do they never continue?

But of course there's a perfectly reasonable explanation why people don't continue in a busy as fuck Japanese game center on a Saturday night. You see there's this unwritten rule in Japan that, while people are waiting behind you, you are only allowed a single credit. So perhaps it's not that they don't want to continue; perhaps they do, but simply refrain out of politeness.

So we leave it at that and agree to meet on Monday morning at the same arcade, when it will be pretty much empty, and see what happens when there's no pressure on the players to give up their seat to others who are waiting.

And of course on Monday we get the exact same story. A dude is playing *Valkyrie no Densetsu* all by himself, makes it three-quarters of the way through the game, dies, and gets up and leaves. That was the highlight of our visit — but no one else seemed to have the slightest inclination to continue either.

But this time — stop the presses! — you come up with a theory.

Perhaps, since we happen to be in one of the most famous game centers in all of Japan, perhaps this place, and the others around it, are frequented mostly by ultrahardcore players who are not likely to continue. So to test

this theory we spend the day checking out arcades all over Tokyo: large ones in Ikebukuro, in Shibuya and Shinjuku, and little ones like the one under the overpass next to Kanda JR station near my old neighborhood, but wherever we go it's always the same story.

To save you the effort of going around Japan trying to find credit-feeders, I explain that in three years of living in this country, and playing arcade games on an almost daily basis, I've only seen people continue twice: once, these two clearly clueless non-gamers credit-feeding through most of *Ghost Squad*, and another time two schoolgirls playing some other light gun shooter whose name right now escapes me.

And so our little educational trip comes to an end

But of course I have yet to explain the reasoning behind the one-credit rule. After all, the fact that that is what the Japanese do is an observation, not a reason.

But try to imagine yourself in an actual arcade and you'll begin to see the reasons. In an arcade, playing games costs money. Your MAME collection at home was free and you've already written off the cost of whatever ports you own, but spending a couple of hours a day in an arcade does not come cheap (especially if you suck, which, if you are reading this because you expect some sort of a revelation from me, you most certainly do).

So you pick a new game, play a credit for ten or so minutes until you lose, and while the continue timer is counting down you consider your options. If you let it time out and start over, you will get another ten or so minutes of playtime, but if you continue you probably won't even last half as long, since the game has obviously got harder now and you obviously can't handle it.

Do you see?

And with each successive time you continue you end up getting less and less playtime, to the point where you might as well just be emptying your wallet's contents into the fucking thing.

But if you take it from the beginning enough times, the *opposite* starts happening – you get increasingly *more* playtime out of each credit, instead of less; eventually, you get to a point where you can go on for twenty minutes or more on a single credit. Get good enough at two-three games, and suddenly

spending a few of hours in an arcade ends up being relatively inexpensive.

This is how the one-credit rule began — with kids cutting school with little money in their pockets, loving these games and wanting to spend as much time as possible with them.

Back then we had no access to freeplay modes. Back then there were no emulators with infinite credits. But though we were forced by circumstances to play these games the hard way, we soon discovered that that was the *only* way to play them.

We discovered that arcade games are much like sports. You start playing and the game gets harder and harder, and soon enough you hit a wall. And the whole point of it is getting strong enough to break through *that* wall, and reach the next wall, and become even stronger to break through that wall, etc. etc. If every time you come to a wall you take out a little folding ladder and just use that to climb over, what's the point of the exercise?

Arcade games are all about the adrenaline rush which kicks in within a couple of minutes of starting one, and doesn't let up until you are either dead or managed to beat the game.

It's all about finally reaching the second boss with full health and doing your best to take that sucker down, filled with expectation to see what the next stage looks like, what it sounds like, what it plays like...

And so you failed this time — you are not good enough yet to kill the second boss — what's the point of BUYING your way past him?

For fuck's sake dude, you won't even be able to handle the next stage anyway! What satisfaction can you possibly get by going through it while getting killed every five seconds, and bombing, bombing, bombing... ?

Don't you see that all the tension the designers have carefully worked to build into the encounter with that boss is completely ruined if you know that, even if he kills you, you'll get past him anyway? And what reason do you have to get past him like a man, if you've already seen what comes next?

Well, you might have already seen what comes next by watching some other guy play the game, but you still haven't felt what it's like to *play* what comes next.

And if you continue, you never will! Indeed, you never will *exactly because* you are used to continuing!

You will never know what it feels like to play through — not over — a tough challenge, and move on to an even tougher one, getting better acquainted with the controls and the system, delving into the game at a deeper

level of proficiency. Doing stuff on screen that random passerbys find humanly impossible. Conquering the game. Not letting it conquer you.

This is what arcade gaming is all about.

But to be this good doesn't take ages

Really, it doesn't. Arcade games may be like sports in some ways, but we are not talking about synchronized swimming here, where athletes must be in tune with every single muscle of their body, and where they have to train since early childhood if they are to be any good. Once upon a time people like me could boast that our skill at arcade games was due to our superior reflexes, which had been honed by playing these games for decades, but these days there are enough nineteen-year-olds winning tournaments and dominating high-score boards to expose our empty posturing for what it was.

So it doesn't take years to get good at arcade games, but it still takes *something*. It takes a different mindset. Because as long as you approach *Metal Slug* the same way you approach *Onimusha*, you will keep sucking. Modern action games require almost no skill whatsoever (and yes, this includes *DMC 3* and the 3D *Ninja Gaiden* and anything else you'd care to mention). They are designed to be finished within a more or less set amount of time — sometimes it even says so on the box! The player is supposed to *run through them* — not struggle against them. You spend a couple of evenings in front of your TV, you get to the end, and that's it.

But do the same thing with an arcade game and you'll get nowhere. Sports analogy time again: no one gets good at tennis or swimming by training for two days straight: the way to do it is by short practice sessions several times a week, and keeping this up for long enough to see results.

The arcade environment even facilitates this, as people drop by on their way to school or work, playing a few credits and then going about their business, and coming back later that same day, and the next day, and the one after that.

And there is yet another aspect of the arcades that is relevant here, and that is completely lost on those who have never experienced it. An arcade is a highly social environment; those of its strengths which are not due to the pay-per-play business model stem from this fact.

If getting past a certain stage in some game or figuring out a scoring mechanic is giving you too much trouble — in other words, if you get stuck

at some point — all you have to do is hang back for a while, and before long someone will come by and do it all right in front of you. He'll show you how to best use your weapons, which power-ups to pick up, where on screen to place yourself at the crucial moments, how to avoid the bosses' attack patterns and when to launch your counter-attack: dude, he will show you everything. And you can even ask questions when he's done!

Remember when I said in the beginning that an arcade has this quality of turning whiny kids into ninjas? This is what I meant.

As long as you make the decision to never continue again and concentrate on a couple of games at a time, playing a few credits a day or every other day, getting advice from others, and keeping this up for a couple of months or so, you will begin to see dramatic improvements.

And for total arcade scrubs, who've never 1CCed anything in their lives, it's important to note that things get much easier (and a whole lot more fun) once you've mastered the first couple of games. Once you've managed to get to the fourth or fifth stage in a Cave shooter, doing the same on most others will take you less than half the time the first one did. Once you've mastered your first character in a fighting game, memorized his entire moveset and learned the workings of the system so as to get past the button-mashing stage, doing the same thing for another fighter, or in another game, becomes infinitely easier. In every arcade genre: light gun, platform, rhythm, whatever, there's this initial hurdle to overcome, after which you are no longer the credit-feeding, shell-shocked scrub, but someone who's been there and knows what he has to do and how to go about improving.

But of course if you are sitting at home by yourself, trying to play some arcade game on your laptop's tiny screen with a keyboard or some punkass flimsy pad, loading up the game with a dozen credits at a time — games designed to be played on appropriate displays, with at the very least decent arcade sticks, in an environment that rewards mastery and fosters competition (not only in versus games, but also through the use of high score boards) — yeah, is it any wonder that people who first come in contact with these games in such a miserable way end up calling them “quarter-munchers,” shallow, boring, stupidly difficult, a dying breed...

If only ignorant and stupid gamers were a dying breed!

Why the East is the best The official explanation for why arcades are dead in the West is that the consoles killed them. This is what most people will tell you.

But if this is the only reason, then why are arcades in Japan still alive, and

in certain genres (fighting, shooting, rhythm) even thriving and leading the way? Consoles mauled arcades in Japan too, but they didn't quite manage to kill them dead. Why is that?

Some of the more knowledgeable people will have an answer to this. Arcades are still alive in Japan, they will say, because of the way cities are laid out, with game centers to be found in every sizeable neighborhood, next to coin laundries, subway stations, etc. Students and salarymen have developed a habit of going to the arcades before and after school or work, and during breaks, and they are the ones who sustain them. In the US, in contrast, arcades are usually in malls in the middle of nowhere, forcing people to go out of their way to reach them.

Now this explanation certainly accounts for the larger part of the US, but it doesn't account for European cities, which have more in common with the tight layout of Japanese cities than with the downtown/suburbia model of many American ones.

So let me provide the last piece to this puzzle.

Arcades survived in Japan because far more players there came to understand the essence of arcade gaming, while realizing that those newfangled full-motion-video wankfests that started appearing during the 32-bit era could never provide them with the rush that only an unforgiving arcade game can. So even though many were seduced by the cheaper, easier, better-looking console games, many others were not, and they are the ones we have to thank for the survival of the arcade form.

In the West, however, the one-credit rule never really took hold, and as a result the vast majority of players never managed to get good at anything — many of them in fact being so ignorant as to regard 1CCing as impossible. Going back to my childhood, I remember that in the arcades I frequented there were always a couple of guys who were said to have 1CCed this or that game, but I rarely ever saw such a feat in person, and pretty much everyone around credit-fed games when they could afford to.

Credit-feeding was never looked down upon in the West, and therefore the vast majority of players never got a chance to become skilled in any particular genre. So when the consoles overtook the arcades in the technical specs, and when, for the first time, home games started looking better than arcade ones, the masses became seduced by the high resolutions and pretty colors and CG cutscenes, and there was nothing that they missed from the arcade days — indeed, they were happy to be finally rid of all those “shallow quarter-munchers.” They never knew the buzz one gets from ruthless high-

level competition (as in all kinds of versus games), or from that of high-level performance requiring intense concentration (as in shooters, side-scrollers, puzzle games, beat 'em ups, etc.), and so they never missed it.

Why did this ethic take such a strong hold in Japan, to the point where credit-feeding is now considered unthinkable, and not in the West, where credit-feeding is considered normal and everyone who objects is labeled elitist?

Doubtless the answer has something to do with cultural differences, and doubtless part of it is that the Japanese have produced 99

Epilogue

In Western countries today we face a paradox. Thanks to the proliferation of arcade-focused online communities, there are now more people than ever who understand these games and play them the way they are meant to be played. Yet there are far fewer people playing them on the whole than in the past, because the random credit-feeding kids that used to support our arcades have grown up now and are happily watching cutscenes in Metal Gear Solid and Kingdom Hearts thankyouverymuch.

So our arcades are gone, or have turned into pitiful versions of what they once were, and we are forced to mod or import our consoles, mail order ports of the latest titles from Japan, and, the luckiest among us, outright buy arcade boards and cabinets worth hundreds or thousands of dollars. All this in an effort to recreate the arcade environment at home, an effort which, because of the social aspect of the arcades, we know is ultimately futile.

Yet as long as arcades are still alive in Japan this most peculiar of branches of gaming will not die. The ports will keep coming, emulation will catch up with those titles that go unported (and provide us with access to the countless classics of the past — enough games to last several lifetimes), arcade boards will keep coming down in price — and who knows how things will turn out in the future?

The arcade philosophy may even make a real comeback on consoles one day. And despite the degenerate “arcade” games that developers try to pass off to us from time to time, there are still the occasional genuine ones (*Shin Contra*, *Gradius V* — even *Geometry Wars Retro Advanced* is a true arcade game, if not a particularly good or interesting one).

Indeed, it's not too far-fetched to imagine a day when the arcades are

reborn again in some sort of *Snow Crash*-like Metaverse, a virtual world where we'll all be able to hang out in massive virtual reality arcades to our heart's content (think of a massively multiplayer version of the arcade in *Shenmue* and you are halfway there).

But in the meantime, those of us who understand what arcade games are all about — that is to say, those of us who have felt the exhilaration of conquering a challenge that at first glance seems impossible — will have to be patient.

We'll have to be patient not only because seeing all those cool new games coming out in Japan with no ports in sight can drive a man to alcoholism and other abuses if he doesn't watch it, but because there's no chance that the gaming masses will understand us anytime soon, and finally see what it is we get out of arcade gaming (and what they are missing), and learn to respect us and the games we enjoy. After all, one can't truly respect what one doesn't understand, and it is a characteristic of the masses that they are never capable of understanding very much.

In this respect, things are worse than they seem. I was left dumbstruck recently by a negative review of *Golden Axe*, which, among other absurdities, slammed the game for being “too difficult” and a “quarter-sucker.” It's worth noting here that

GOLDEN AXE IS ONE OF THE EASIEST ARCADE GAMES EVER MADE.

So yeah, my initial reaction to that review was to LOL, but though I was laughing on the outside on the inside I was dying. Because this review did not appear on a big professional magazine or website (professional reviewers know little even about the modern mainstream games they cover — let alone old arcade ones) but on a brand-new, edgy, revolutionary even, in some respects, website, written by extremely passionate gamers — people with decades of experience in games, not years.

And so I died a little inside after reading that review because it drove home the fact that, if guys like them are capable of saying such nonsense, what hope is there for everyone else?

Sometimes I think — when I sit down to think about arcade games, their past, their future — that if I could only fly people to Tokyo and take them to an arcade in Akihabara even for an hour, I could make them see. I am convinced that if it was possible to do such a thing I could get practically *anyone* addicted to these games; if I did it with enough people I could single-handedly turn around the fortunes of the arcade industry. Sometimes I think

this is the only way. They'd see the magic up close, I tell myself. They'd get hooked on it.